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Crèches: Abuse, bullying and neglect

■ Complaints by parents reveal childcare truth ■ Incidents include injuries and filthy premises ■ Call for state regulations to be strengthened

by Catherine Shanahan

PARENTS across the country have filed a disturbing litany of complaints about the crèches their children attend.

Broken limbs, filthy premises, bullying, slapping by staff and lax security feature in the complaints made to the Health Service Executive (HSE), according to documents released to the Irish Examiner.

In one incident in Dublin, a two-and-a-half year old was bitten approximately 10 times by another child in the crèche, with one of the bite marks lasting for six weeks. At a second crèche, a child required a blood test after being bitten by another child.

In another incident, a mother coming to collect her son from a Kildare crèche found him wandering around the playground unsupervised and dressed in just a T-shirt.

A mother in Dublin also claimed her son was given Calpol without her permission to make him quiet and drowsy and that she could smell it on his clothes.

The disturbing details of complaints made by parents during the period October 1, 2005, to September 30, 2006, were released under the Freedom of Information Act. The most serious accusations include:

■ A parent in Sligo complained her three-year-old was locked into a room for being “bold”. According to the parent — who arrived early to collect the child — the little girl was very upset after being locked in a room in a downstairs part of the house where there was little light.

■ A mother “was horrified” when she arrived at her child’s crèche in Dublin to see months of accumulated rubbish piled up in the children’s play area — HSE inspectors counted 30 bags of household waste — and a dead rat in the play area.



Documents released to the Irish Examiner reveal the complaints made to the HSE about crèches concerned broken limbs, filthy premises, bullying, slapping by staff and lax security.

■ In Dublin, a six-year-old child broke his finger when the glass fire door, from which a slow release device had been removed, closed on his hand. His mother complained that “the facility was so busy with parties and children being collected from summer camps it was impossible to hear his screams for help”. She also claimed the staff had no idea how to administer first aid, and that when she requested a copy of the health and safety file to see if the incident had been logged, she was advised that an administration fee of €25 applied.

INSIDE

Crèche complaints — the full list. **News: 6 & 7**

“Childcare is an area where we must know the State has done everything possible to ensure that services, private or public, are the best that they can be. Whether we can rely on a government that so spec-

tacularly botched something as simple as driving licence legislation to do this remains to be seen. **Editorial: 12**

An expert underlines the need for proper regulation and monitoring of childcare services. **Analysis: 13**

Among parents’ greatest concerns were inadequate staff/child ratios, lack of supervision, poor food quality,

crèches were threatened with legal action, a number were closed; in another case, a parent contacted social workers and the gardai, and in Cork and Kerry five complaints were referred to child protection teams.

Last night, a spokesperson for the HSE confirmed court action was taken against eight crèches in 2006, including three in Dublin mid-Leinster, three in Dublin north-east and two in the HSE South.

A spokesperson for the Minister for Children Brendan Smith said he was “keenly aware of public concerns in this (pre-school) area”. He said the minister’s commitment to raising the standard of care in the childcare sector was evident by the introduction in September of revised childcare regulations, which will introduce Garda vetting of childcare workers.

However, solicitor Geoffrey Shannon, author of the recently published Child Law, said clarification was needed as to whether “soft information” could be processed by the vetting unit, that is, information that falls short of a criminal conviction but indicates a concern

- ### The complaints
- Three-year-old girl locked in room for being “bold”.
 - Dead rat found in children’s play area.
 - Child had to undergo blood test after being bitten.
 - Children taken on field trip without parents’ knowledge.
 - Boy given Calpol to make him drowsy.
 - Dublin city crèche staff member dismissed for inappropriate behaviour.
 - Nine-month-old barred from crèche because mother complained about conditions.
 - Four-year-old girl alleged to have knocked crèche worker to floor and kicked her.

PD senator attacks Ahern rise

by Shaun Connolly
Political Correspondent

TAOISEACH Bertie Ahern came under attack from within government ranks last night for taking a controversial €38,000 pay rise.

PD senator Fiona O’Malley accused Mr Ahern of scoring an own goal with his “unwise” decision.

Ms O’Malley said Mr Ahern had set a bad example in light of government warnings of an economic slowdown and tight budget.

She accused him of a lack of restraint while expecting

it from ordinary workers saying he should have been deferred the 14% increase for the rest of his term.

“Even if it were held over until the next administration so he would not personally benefit — I just think it is not wise at this time when the Minister for Finance keeps advising us that we are coming into a difficult time,” Ms O’Malley told Newstalk.

Ms O’Malley is the first person to break rank over the massive ministerial pay awards since they provoked outrage last Thursday.

Mr Ahern tried to make a

joke of his annual salary soaring to €310,000 saying that unlike other European leaders he did not live in a publicly funded palace.

The review of top people’s pay also saw Tánaiste and Finance Minister Brian Cowen’s wages leap by 15.6% to €270,000.

Mr Ahern brushed aside calls to waive his pay increase and now ranks as one of the highest paid leaders in the democratic world with a salary 10 times the Irish industrial average wage.

A spokesman for the Taoiseach declined to comment.



ARTS

Film success

Mark Mahon’s first feature film, Strength and Honour, starring ex-footballer turned LA actor Vinnie Jones and shot entirely in Cork, is tipped for Hollywood success. **Page: 14**

WORLD

Role reversal

President Néstor Kirchner and first lady Cristina Fernández are poised to switch roles, with election indicating Argentines elected a female president for the first time. **Page: 11**

Buy green, end up in the red

by Paul Kelly
Consumer Correspondent

HOUSEHOLDERS who want to buy environmentally friendly products can end up paying double the price of standard goods.

An Irish Examiner study of the prices of 10 household goods from toilet cleaner to dishwasher powder found that greener products range from 12% cheaper to 119% more expensive.

Standard washing powder, for instance, is €7.99 for a box of 40 tablets

compared to €8.43 for a pack of 25 doses of environmentally friendly detergent.

At a cost of 26 cent per tablet the “greener” brand is 30% more expensive.

Likewise a pack of 40 kitchen bin bags costs €1.75, while biodegradable ones sell for €3.83, a difference of 119%.

Low-energy light bulbs cost €4.39 each against 76c for standard 60-watt bulbs.

Environmental campaign group Friends of the Earth Ireland (FoEI) wants a “level field”.

“There is a role for government,” said FoEI director Oisín Coghlan.

“The role is not necessarily in price regulation but taxing ‘bad’ lightbulbs would do something to help society make the switch.”

Mr Coghlan said he also wanted green goods to be covered by similar consumer assurance schemes like Guaranteed Irish or Fairtrade so householders are sure the extra price they pay does help the environment.

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